

Innovative Solutions for Complex Problems

Donna C. L. Prestwood & Paul A. Schumann, Jr.
Glocal Vantage, Inc.

Complex problems usually involve people. To solve complex problems requires at least seven different skills - interviewing, facilitation, survey, scenarios, communication, research & analysis and personality types & values. To solve complex problems innovatively requires creativity and the ability to integrate all the information gathered to gain the wisdom of the people.

Interviewing

In today's environment with many complex problems to be solved, interviewing individuals is often the most effective and efficient way to gain trust and involvement. Moreover, it is often the only way to find common ground by giving diverse people the opportunity to express themselves. To develop interview skills, remember you are there to listen, not talk. Put your own agenda away. You are there to find out what the individuals representing a group really think in order to find out where they collectively want to go. Have a set of questions you ask everyone, but be prepared to explore areas each individual wants to talk about.

Interviewing puts you in direct contact with the person. There is still no substitute for face to face interaction. It is broadband communication with myriad verbal and non-verbal clues to understanding. As the ancient sages understood, "Let us draw closer to the fire so that we may better see what we are saying."

Facilitation

The ability to give guidance in a dynamically changing group environment while gathering ideas and opinions is extremely valuable. Use a variety of techniques tailored to meet the needs of the situation and size of the group (e.g., focus groups, brainstorming, nominal group, and impact wheel). In many instances, especially where diversity of opinion and position exist, conduct interviews, or surveys, as the input to a facilitated discussion.

Surveys

Surveys are very useful where the potential participants are interested either in having input into the problem definition or the outcome of the problem explored by the survey questionnaire. The type of survey and the medium of delivery (e.g., written, telephone, electronic) will vary depending on information requirements, the size of the group to be surveyed, the willingness of the group to participate and the budget allocated.

Scenarios

Often time people who are dealing with multiple and frequently conflicting circumstances benefit from having the environment or "decision space" defined in a narrative. Multiple scenarios describing alternative futures or outcomes are extraordinarily valuable tools for assisting decision-making. People presented with well-delineated scenarios are more often helped to reach consensus on a preferred future.

Communication

The ability to communicate (listen, present, speak, write) is essential. Utilize many skills and tactics to assure that people hear things correctly and that people understand each other's message. Make sure that you use a balance of right and left brain communication tools and techniques.

Research & Analysis

The underpinning of all complex problem solving is quality research and analysis. Quite often people disagree because they do not have the same information. Facilitation and surveys produce better results if they include clearly communicated results of new research and analysis

Personality Type & Values

At other times disagreements occur because of conflicting personalities and/or values. Using personality type approaches and values assessments to assist us in our consensus building work. Often in small groups it is helpful to use personality type and values assessment instruments to help people understand why they differ.

Donna Prestwood and Paul Schumann are consultants with Glocal Vantage, Inc. (www.glocalvantage.com).